DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 151 FL 016 049

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TITLE Some Limitations in Teaching Composition.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Handscombe, Jean, Ed.; And Others. On TESOL '83. The Question of Control. Selected Papers from the Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (17th, Toronto, Canada, March 15-20, 1983); see FL 015 035.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Objectives; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Language Teachers; Second Language Instruction; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Teacher Role; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Audience Response

ABSTRACT

Analysis of the variety and complexity of processes involved in composition suggests that while there is much a teacher can do to help students become proficient writers, it is also important to recognize that teachers have certain limitations. These include the degree to which they can provide students with knowledge about the writing topic; their information about the expectations of the audiences for whom the students will write; their ability to involve students in the writing process sufficiently to enable them to consciously select methods to suit their writing intentions; and the degree to which they can encourage students to value self-evaluation. However, these limitations should not discourage the teaching of composition; rather they should help clarify what teachers can do in composition class, such as encouraging students to observe their environment carefully, illustrating techniques to create a particular effect, helping students to examine and enjoy the work of other writers, and urging them to be the final judges of the success of their work. (MSE)

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Some Limitations in Teaching Composition

Sandra McKay

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of *teaching* composition suggests that writing is a skill consisting of units which can be sequenced, presented, and tested in a formal instructional setting. Yet I would argue that writing is not just a skill, but also a way of perceiving, learning and developing. As Irmscher puts it, "writing is more than a frozen record of thinking. It is an action and a way of knowing" (1979:241). This way of knowing encompasses at least three complex activities: first, becoming aware of selected details in the environment; second, abstracting these details for analysis; and finally, imposing on them some type of order. It is because of these processes that, as Odell points out, even "apparently simple engaging writing tasks may entail rather complex conceptual activity" (1980:44).

Let us stop for a moment and analyze the conceptual strategies demanded by the following timed writing topic:

> Most people have one possession that is especially important to them. For example, some people may value their musical instruments because of the many hours they spend playing music on them. Other people may value a piece of jewelry because it belonged to a relative. Finally, others may value a photograph, a teapot, or a wall hanging because it reminds them of home.
>
> Think about a possession you have that is very important to you. Write a paper in which you: first describe it, and then explain why it is so important to you.
>
> In the first part, be so specific that readers will be able to visualize it. In the second part, provide sufficient examples so that a reader will be able to understand exactly why the object is valuable to you.

In order to write on this topic, writers first need to sort through the vast number of possessions that they have or have had and then to select one of these which is important. Writers must also define what they mean by importance, which could

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include everything from the object's commonality to its uniqueness, from its permanence to its transiency from its size to its shape.

The next problem would be to describe the object. Suppose, as many of my students did, you selected a photograph. How would you describe it? As an image reproduced on a 3 by 5 piece of photosensitive surface? Probably not. Yet in some instances, such as a science class, this type of description would be highly appropriate. Should the size of the photograph be mentioned? This depends on the individual's definition of importance. If size contributes to the significance of the photograph, then certainly it should be included. If it is rather the content of the photograph that is important, then the question is which elements of the picture itself should be described? Should the description include the stance, hair style, facial expression, and/or clothing of the individuals in the photograph? Any or all of these details might be relevant, but they are relevant only if they contribute to the significance of the item. In short, the description of the object requires a fine balancing between various aspects of the concrete object and the writer's definition of importance.

An additional complexity of the task rests in its rhetorical dimension. Since the description is for an audience, the writer may feel that certain objects are too personal or precious to detail to a relative stranger, such as a teacher. Thus, writers have to narrow the choice of object to one which they are willing to describe for a public audience. Finally, writers need to be able to express their sense of the topic within the many constraints imposed by the language itself. They must have the language available to describe the object in a precise and vivid manner. Hence, a relatively simple writing task can involve a variety of complex processes.

The point is that many of these processes are never addressed, nor can they be realistically addressed, in a classroom. The richness of the essay depends to a great extent on the ability of the writers to sort through their stored memory of possessions, to select and abstract one of these which has special significance, and to impose some type of order on its description. To write this essay or any other, an individual needs proficiency in many areas including among others, knowledge of the subject, awareness of the audience, an ability to select and organize relevant details, an ability to use appropriate language, and finally, an ability to assess the essay throughout the writing process. Some of these proficiencies can be developed in the classroom, while others have been or will be developed outside the classroom. The question is which aspects of the composing process are best viewed as components of formal training, and which elements are factors of general knowledge and experience acquired outside of the classroom. Let us begin with the writer's knowledge of the subject.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT

Flower and Hayes, in their cognitive process model of writing, depict the relationship between the writer's long-term memory and the writing process as an ongoing interactive one. They point out that "the problem with long-term memory is, first of all, getting things out of it—that is, finding the cue that will let you retrieve a network of useful knowledge. The second problem for a writer is usually recognizing or adapting that information to fit the demands of the rhetorical problem" (1981:371). What can we as composition teachers do to help students use and adapt the information that they have stored in the long-term memory?

First and foremost, we can allow students a great deal of choice in the selection of writing topics or, if we want to select only one topic, we should choose a topic about which the students are likely to have knowledge or experience. Therefore, topics which presuppose a great deal of specific knowledge about American culture or about a particular academic field with which the students are unfamiliar are best avoided. For example, an assignment which asks students to compare and contrast the educational system of their native country with that of the United States assumes that the students know a great deal about the American system of education. If they do not have this knowledge, they will have little or nothing to say.

If we choose to assign expository topics, we have two alternatives. Either we can design topics that the students already know a great deal about, or we can devote class time to helping students become familiar with the topic. The choice here, it seems to me, rests on the scope of the knowledge demanded. To adequately familiarize students with the various elements of the American educational system would necessitate a great deal of reading and discussion. On the other hand, to provide students with information about a fairly limited topic, such as the procedures for registering at a particular university, could be dealt with in a relatively short period of time. In other words, there are limitations as to how much time should be devoted to increasing students' general knowledge so as to provide writing topics. Most of our students come to us with a storehouse of information. What we need to do is to design topics which will draw on this information.

If, on the other hand, we choose to assign personal topics, we will still need to help our students recall these experiences. Heuristic devices, brainstorming, journal writing are all ways of doing this. For example, in order to help students write on a personal topic such as an important possession, we could do such things as ask students to describe, in their journals, the experiences they have had that they associate with this object, or we could have them bring the object to class and then share these experiences with their classmates. But there are limits as to what we can do to help students draw on their own personal experiences for writing topics. For example, with the topic of personal possessions, the value that individual students place on objects, and the richness of the personal experiences they associate with these objects are entirely beyond our control. Thus, even if we select topics of a personal nature, although we can help students recall their experiences, the breadth of these experiences will always be beyond our control.

AWARENESS OF THE AUDIENCE

Proficient writers are also aware of their audience. Learning to manipulate one's verbal and nonverbal repertoire in order to obtain a desired result is an ongoing process in which some people ultimately achieve much greater skill than others. The ability to shift one's register for an audience to achieve a specific result undoubtedly varies on an individual basis in all cultures. However, which elements of an exchange will affect the desired response are often culture specific. Take, for example, a business letter. In the United States, an effective business letter gets to the point quickly and directly. However, in other cultures such a tack may seem brusque and offensive. If writing topics are designed so as to imagine or, in fact, have an audience other than the teacher, class time could and should be devoted to helping students become aware of this particular audience's expectations. Thus, for example, students need to be taught what the typical United States' businessperson expects in

a business letter. When the audience for the students' papers is the teacher, we should make it clear to the students what we expect to find in the essay. We may, for example, have very specific expectations as to the topic and development of the essay, expectations which should be clearly specified in the assignment.

One device to help students become aware of their audience is that set forth by Pfister and Petrick (1980:214). They suggest that before students begin to write they consider questions such as the following.

> What is the audience like? What is their socioeconomic status, their educational and cultural experience, their values?
> What does the audience know about the topic? What is their opinion on the topic? How strong is this opinion?
> What is my relationship with this audience? Do they know me well? Do they share my values? Why is this topic appropriate for this audience?
> What is my purpose in addressing this audience? What role should I assume for this audience?
> What are the best methods for achieving my goals in terms of organization, tone, diction, etc.?

Such heuristic devices help to provide the students with important information about their audience, information which they can then draw on throughout the writing process.

There are limits, however, as to what we can teach our students about their audience. It may be that our students are in academic fields in which we personally are not aware of the typical expectations of the audience in terms of such things as the usual format of the papers and the assumed background knowledge of the readers. Or, it may be that our students are in such varied fields that we will not have the time to deal with the expectations of their professional audiences. Thus, although we can encourage them to be aware of the fact that their audience may have particular expectations, we may not be able to give them specific information on such things as what type of organization, tone or diction will be most effective for their audience.

SELECTING AND ORGANIZING DETAILS

Meeting the expectations of a particular audience depends to a great extent on the writer's selection and organizing of pertinent details. The selection of these details often reflects what Perl (1980:365) terms the writer's "felt-sense" of the topic. However, writers are unlikely to have this felt sense unless they have had some experience with the topic. If, for example, a writing topic involves the legalization of marijuana or the injustices of the United States' court system, topics with which the writers have had little or no experience, it is unlikely they will have any sense of the topic. Therefore, they will find it extremely difficult to elaborate on the topic with relevant details. As one of my students put it, "writing an essay was not very difficult if I had enough information and ideas."

If, however, the topic is of great interest to the writers and is one on which they have a great deal of information, they are still faced with the problem of selecting and organizing the details they have. Many composition classes follow the procedure of providing students with an organizational plan. Yet on many levels this approach is counterproductive for as Flower and Hayes point out, "planning is not a unitary stage, but a distinctive thinking process which writers use over and over again during

composing" (1981:375). If, in a composition class, students are presented with a format for organizing, they will not become conversant with the most important skill of all, namely the ability to sort through their own knowledge and experience and then to select and organize the information which is most relevant to their desired goals. Outside the classroom individuals often organize information in accordance with their goals. They may need to rank priorities in their personal life or to compare the merits of a particular consumer item. Ultimately, it is the problem that dictates which details are relevant and how they should be approached.

What can we do to help students learn how to organize information to achieve a desired result? One thing we can do is to make them aware of various methods of organization and show them how the same information could be organized in several ways. For example, we might take similar information on a specific topic such as the early development of the American railroad and write one text using chronological development and another using cause and effect. Next, we could have students identify the cohesive devices which differentiate the two plans of development. Finally, we could ask students to decide which plan they believe would be more effective if, for example, the author wanted to demonstrate the influence of American business on the development of the railroad. It is important, however, that students see the connection between such exercises and their own writing. One way to assure this is to be available throughout the writing process, helping students to clarify their intentions and select the method of development that will best suit their intentions.

But there are limits to what we can do. Proficient writers have learned how to achieve a match between what they have to say and how they say it, based on their assessment of their audience and their goals. How do they learn this? Quite typically, they learn this by continuing to write and critically analyze their own work. For some of our students, writing has been and may continue to be something they do not enjoy doing. For these students, many of whom may have developed a negative attitude toward writing, we may not be able to encourage them to become sufficiently involved in the writing process so that they will learn to consciously select their method of development to achieve their writing goals.

ABILITY TO USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Proficient writers are able to express their sense of a topic within the limitations imposed by the medium of language. There are, of course, many ways in which a composition class, particularly an ESL class, can develop accuracy and fluency in the language. On a grammatical level, students can be presented with regularities about the language, their errors can be pointed out and their work revised. There are already many texts to aid us with these important aspects of teaching composition, but I am sure we have all had students who write completely accurate papers, yet we would not consider them proficient writers. Why not? Part of this feeling may be caused by the students' obvious lack of knowledge or experience with the topic, but part of it may be because they have limited their expression of the topic to what they are certain will be a correct use of the language. Often unskilled writers are excessively concerned with avoiding errors. Zamel, for example, found that while the least skilled writer in her study "was determined not to commit errors and therefore attended to them prematurely, the more skilled writers devised strategies that allowed them to pursue the development of their ideas without being side tracked by lexical and syntactic difficulties." (1983:175).

There are many things that we can do in helping our students to use appropriate language. First of all, we can decide which errors we will correct and which we will overlook. This decision should be based on such things as the extent to which the error impedes comprehensibility, the proficiency level and goals of the students, and perhaps, most importantly, on the students' own attitude toward making errors. If students are overly concerned with avoiding errors, our best approach with these students may be to give minimal attention to errors, devoting most of our comments to helping them develop their ideas.

We can also decide when to correct errors. A premature concern with errors will focus our students' attention on form before they have had an opportunity to fully explore the topic. Sommers, in her research on teachers' responses to writing, found that teachers' comments can often take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing and instead focus their attention on pleasing the teacher. She maintains that "this appropriation of the text by the teacher happens particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion to how they should view these errors in this point in the process" (1982:150). As Sommers points out, it makes little sense to ask students to correct errors in sentences or paragraphs which in the process of revising may be entirely deleted from the text.

There are, however, limits to what we can do in helping students to use appropriate language. We will never be able to anticipate all the errors that our students will make. Errors in word choice will most likely continue to continue to exist on even a very advanced level. Take, for example, the choice of words in the following excerpt from a student's paper in which he describes his desire to try riding a motorcycle.

> I wanted to know what it was like riding a bike on a raceway. One day, this destination was fulfilled.

It is highly unlikely that we would be able to anticipate this error and thus, instruct students in the appropriate use of *destination* before they use it. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether or not most students would be able to remedy this error themselves. Zamel, for example, in her work with advanced ESL students found that "only two students were able to make decisions about the appropriateness of complex words they found in dictionaries, decisions that rested on their ability to understand word connotations" (1983:175). But there are several things we can do after the student has used an item inappropriately. We could indicate that the student selected the wrong form of the word and let him make the revision. Or, we could cross out the word and replace it with a more common choice such as *wish* or *desire*. Finally, we could use the opportunity to explain some of the differences between *destination* and *destiny*, and between a *wish* and a *destiny*. It seems to me that the last alternative is by far the best since it provides the student with the most feedback. If in our explanation we also supply the student with examples of common uses of the word, destination, in the future this student can base his use of this word on a clear understanding of what effect this choice will have on his audience.

SELF EVALUATION

Finally, proficient writers are able to evaluate the quality of their own work. And, as Taylor (1981:11) points out, students eventually need "to learn to be their

own critics and to be able to revise without extensive outside input." In a recent study, Miller (1982:176-83) investigated what criteria professional writers and students use in evaluating their own writing. One thing she found was that while almost all students thought their good writing was writing that the teacher liked, only 30% of the professional writers based the success of their writing on a positive response from their readers. Professional writers, in contrast to students, often based the evaluations of their work on whether or not the finished product matched their own intention of what they had set out to do and on whether or not they learned anything in the process of writing it. Unfortunately, both of these criteria were rarely mentioned by student writers.

If these criteria of self evaluation are important in the development of proficient writers, and I believe they are, one thing we should do in the classroom is to encourage students to judge their own writing on such standards as whether or not they have learned anything from writing it, rather than on whether or not the teacher liked it. One thing we might do is ask students to provide us with a written evaluation of what they learned from the process of writing the paper. Beaven, for example, suggests that students evaluate their own papers by answering questions such as the following (1977:143).

1. How much time did you spend on this paper?
2. (After the first evaluation) What did you try to improve, or experiment with, on this paper? How successful were you? If you have questions about what you were trying to do, what are they?
3. What are the strengths of your paper? Place a squiggly line beside those passages you feel are very good.
4. What are the weaknesses, if any, of your paper? Place an X beside passages you would like your teacher to correct or revise. Place an X over any punctuation, spelling, usage, etc., where you need help or clarification.
5. What one thing will you do to improve your next piece of writing? Or what kind of experimentation in writing would you like to try? If you would like some information related to what you want to do, write down your questions.
6. (Optional) What grade would you give yourself on this composition? Justify it.

If we do ask students to assign a grade to the paper, we might have them share this grade with us only after we have had a chance to read and evaluate their paper. In conferences we could then compare how we each arrived at our separate evaluation of the paper.

There are limits, however, in the degree to which we will be able to encourage self evaluation. It may be that our students, who are accustomed in their other academic fields and in the educational system, in general, to accept and expect external evaluation, will find it difficult to critically approach their own writing. Furthermore, if the students' primary goal is to please the teacher so that they can achieve a high grade, self evaluation will have value only to the extent that we place a value on it ourselves. Thus, it is important that we strive to encourage self evaluation and help our students to become self-reliant writers. For as Roger maintains in his discussion of the learning process, "it is when the individual has to take the responsibility for deciding what criteria are important to him, what goals he has been trying to achieve, and the extent to which he has achieved those goals, that he truly learns to take responsibility for himself and his directions" (1969:142-3).

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there are many things we can do to help our students become proficient writers. But it is important to recognize that there are limits to what we can do. We are limited, due to time and the personal experience and background of our students, in the degree to which we can provide them with knowledge about the writing topic. There are also limits to our own information about the expectations of particular audiences which our students may need to address. Furthermore, with some students, we may never be able to involve them sufficiently in the writing process so that they learn to consciously select methods of development to suit their intentions. Finally, there are limits to the degree to which we can encourage our students to value self evaluation, if in other contexts it is not valued. These limitations, however, should not discourage us in our endeavors to teach composition. Rather they should help us clarify what we can do in compositions classes so that we will devote our attention to these things.

Composing, like other artistic endeavors, is a way of knowing, developing and creating. Like art instructors, we are limited in what we can teach our students. We too can encourage our students to carefully observe their environment; we can show them techniques to create a particular effect; we can help them to examine and enjoy the work of other writers; and finally, we can urge them to be the final judge of the success of their work. But, ultimately, it is individual writers, like individual artists, who must use this background, along with their own sense of the task, to create.

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